

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON THE CONTINUOUS USE OF ANCIENT UNORTHODOX RELIGIOUS CENTERS

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Ethnographic Research on the Continuous Use of Ancient Unorthodox Religious Centers

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Abstract: In this paper I discuss some megalithic sanctuaries located on the highest peaks in South-Western Bulgaria in connection with the sacred geography that exists, regarding the perception of the area around the settlements, summarized knowledge about the surrounding microcosm and the provision of rainy summer. These sacralized peaks are also presented as a part of the local festive calendar and celebration of important for the local people Christian holidays and saints. A special attention is paid to the pre-Christian elements in characters of the celebrated saints. Last but not least I present the idea of maiden's and female's initiation practiced in the past within the sacred megalithic territory.

Keywords: Ethnography, Initiation, Rain rituals, Feasts, Sacred Geography

Introduction

Megalithic culture in Ancient Thrace is an interdisciplinary scientific programme of the University Research Center for Ancient European and East Mediterranean culture at South-West University Neofit Rilski. The programme is realized in co-operation with Regional Ethnographic Museum Plovdiv, National Archaeological Institute and Museum at BAS, Institute for Space Research and Technology at BAS – Branch at Stara Zagora, National Astronomical Observatory and Planetarium Yurii Gagarin – Stara Zagora. Main purpose of the programme is investigation of the megalithic culture using interdisciplinary scientific methods – archaeological, ethnological, archaeoastronomical etc. within research expeditions named Thracian Sanctuaries from the Western Rodophes Mountains, Pirin, Rila and Central Sredna Gora.

Ethnological researches are an important part of the field work since the beginning of the scientific programme at 2001. As a result more than 30 villages have been investigated in the last 15 years. The aim is to record local oral stories about sacred geography, rituals of local festive cycle, legends, toponymy, magical healing treatments etc.

Some aspects of the ethnological records regard continuous use of ancient unorthodox religious centers, located on the highest peaks in South-Western Bulgaria. These megalithic places are connected for centuries with local Christian or Muslim festive cycle or else magical healing treatments. In my paper I present some of them from the point of view of sacred geography, feasts and rites. A special attention is paid to the pre-Christian characters of patron saints and to connection between patron feast and local rain believes. Last but not least I present some rituals of maiden's and female's initiation made in the past within the megalithic territory of the sacralized peaks.

Sacred Territory of the Villages

"Our village is surrounded all around by Saints"¹ - this statement is common in stories of informants and it alludes to the sacred geography that exists, regarding the perception of the area around the settlement.

An average man does not know the world in a wide perimeter. He does not travel and does not reach further from the market, the farthest field or mill. Practically, the territory inhabited by him is the center of his personal and family world, and the geography shaped by the landscape around the village is the border of the used space. This definition applies to an even greater extent to women who are static and do not know any other worlds, besides the one they inhabit. Indeed, women are responsible for the protection of the notion of sacred, as well as for the preservation of holidays and rituals that accompany this notion (Николов 1994:53).

Sacred Territory and Meteorology

Inhabiting certain geographical conditions for generations, inevitably leads to the accumulation of observations, on the base of which we can summarize knowledge about the surrounding microcosm. As the rational knowledge is seen through the prism of the irrational ideas of the traditional man, the places with increased semantic mark preserve their relevance for generations.

Places with high semantic meaning are those where certain atmospheric phenomena repeat. The dependence of the agrarian society of weather phenomena, contributed to their millennial observation, understanding, positioning and personalization, in which a special role is played by the geography around the village. The traditional man knows not only the forms of the terrain, but also the places where atmospheric phenomena occur and repeat. The fogs and the rain clouds are the first phenomena to be mentioned here. The traditional man - a resident of the respective village knows where the peaks from which "the rain comes from" or "does not come from" are situated. Observation is rational, but its understanding becomes the basis of irrational ideas about the world in which the good dragon gives grace and fights the evil one, who wants to steal Fertility. In practice, this is a rational idea that forms the base of the dragon toposes or the places, worshiped as sacred in connection with a Christian Saint Thunderer. The most accurate example is St. Elijah, who inherited features of the God of the storm from pre-Christian beliefs. The churches patroned by him are usually the highest geographical point of the settlement. Other saints who are believed to be patrons of the rain by the population of Southwest Bulgaria are The Holy Spirit, St. Spas, St. Kostadin.

Weather phenomena periodically strengthen the beliefs about the place as sacred. If we take a view at broader geographical scale, especially in mountainous areas, we can see how this idea is repeated in connection with each peak, where a

¹ Records of research expeditions Thracian Sanctuaries from The Western Rodopes, Pirin, Rila and Central Sredna Gora Mountains

settlement is situated. Significantly, at a series of peaks in the valleys of the rivers Struma and Mesta, such as: Pilentseto, Lyaski peak, Palatski peak, Krastilski peak and others, we observe festivals dedicated to the “production” of a rainy summer. One such statement says "If it rains in the Rhodopes mountains, it will not rain in Gotse Delchev Plain" or "If there is fog at the peak of Lyaskovo, it's gonna rain..."²

Megalithic Monuments and Christian Feasts

The megalithic monuments studied by us – the sacralized peaks are part of the local festive calendar and are connected to the celebration of important for the local people Christian holidays and saints. On May 21, the population of Delchevo celebrates the Day of Saint Kostadin at the peak of St. Kostadin. On May 9, the population of Dobrotinovo celebrates the feast of St. Krastor by giving a *kurban* (sacrificial offering) at peak of Pilentseto. On May 22, the population of the villages Lyaski and Musomishta honor at the top of Lyaskovski peak, St. Christopher, but the holiday is more popular as the day of the Holy Spirit to whom a sacrificial offering is given. The Holy Spirit is also celebrated at the churchyard near the village of Pirin where there is a cave, known among the locals as the Dincho's dragon nest. At Palatski and Krastilski peak, located respectively near the villages Palat and Krastilsi, people celebrate the Day of St. Spass. At the peak of Mitrovica people from the villages Mesta and Osenovo, celebrate the Day of St. Dimitar.

Repetition of the same feasts and saints is not accidental. In Pirin and the Rhodope Mountains, *Kostadinovden* (the Day of St. Kostadin) is celebrated against thunder and hail (Джарева 1980:448, Янков 2003:58-59, Попов 1994:110). On the Day of St. Spass, celebrated on the 40th day after Easter, people do not go to work, in order not to cause hail in the summer, while rites are performed to produce fertility, to increase the need of people in the field, prayers and *kurbans* for rain (Джарева 1980:448; Попов 1994:106-107). In most villages, in the Pirin region, the feast of the Holy Spirit or Spirits' Day is celebrated to honor the dead, it is believed that on this day they leave the land and either go to Heaven, or Hell (Джарева 1980:449). At the same time various healing rituals are performed and people give joint *kurbans* between villages (Попов 1994:107), such as the above mentioned feast at Lyaskovski peak, where the Holy Spirit is honored to send rain.

It is interesting to explore what is the popular and communal reflection on the image of Christian saints, honored in connection with the Christianized megalithic sites. The population of Palat village, where Palatski peak is situated, has no clear idea of the image of St. Spas. This is natural, given that in the canonical Christian faith, a saint named Spas does not exist. People from Palat village, however, present him as a mischievous man and on the eve of the feast they sacrifice a goat instead of a lamb. Thus they consider that they comply with his devilish nature, because the kid goat is a devil like animal. We could not found

² Records of research expeditions Thracian Sanctuaries from The Western Rodophes, Pirin, Rila and Central Sredna Gora Mountains

any ethnographic description of St. Krastor, honored by the population of Dobrotinovo village at the peak of Pilentseto, but on the other hand, we have interesting information in connection with the worship of St. Christopher at Lyaskovski peak. According to local beliefs, St. Christopher was a very handsome man and all the girls wanted him to be their husband. He did not want to marry. He wanted to devote himself to God, so he prayed, *"Lord, please make me look like a dog so the girls won't like me. I want to devote myself to you!"* The Lord transformed him. In honor of God, St. Christopher made the first sacrifice at Lyaskovski peak. Along with St. Christopher at Lyaskovski peak, people honor the Holy Spirit and in ethnographic information there is no clear distinction between them. The Holy Spirit is honored in the image of the Thunderer – who shakes the Earth with his thunder powers. Local meteorological beliefs tell that wherever the Holy Spirit send thunders at Lyaskovski peak, then comes the rain. Therefore, in the summer, the population looks with hope to the top, because whenever there is fog, it will definitely rain. It is also interesting, in future field researches, to explore further the image of St. Kostadin, in the minds of the population of Delchevo village, as in the researched area and in particular in the Western Rhodopes, St. Kostadin is believed to be a guardian of the agricultural land, who protects it from hail, in the image of a mythical creature that flies in the sky (Янков 2003:50).

In the listing of local holy places lying on megalithic sites and the accompanying festivities, it strikes that on the calendar they are all concentrated after the Easter cycle that marks one of the transitional periods of the year - from spring to summer. At the beginning of the summer agricultural cycle, shortly before harvesting the wheat crop, the traditional population must pray for moisture and fertility in the coming months (Дяков 2003:66). Here comes the irrational meteorological knowledge, related to the sacred geography of the settlement, that position the saint - the patron saint of rain, thunder and humidity at the highest peak, where "the rain comes from" in the summer months.

Pre-Christian Elements in Celebrations

One of the specific requirements in the celebration of the feast of St. Krastor at Pilentseto peak is related to the cutting of a evergreen Fir tree from the forest situated on the northern foothills. The tree is fastened to the highest point on top and stay there all year round. It is replaced on the next year or in case of a prolonged drought during the summer. The local population believes that after placing the tree, on the way back to the village, it will rain for sure. At the beginning of 21st century, on the site, where a tree was fastened earlier, an iron cross is placed. However, the tradition of cutting trees continued and it is observed today. In that regard, in the past there was an interesting form of choosing. Informants are adamant that not everyone can cut a tree. Among the assembled for the holiday crowd, people elect the one who meet certain ethical criteria – a man who is not arrogant and derisive.

Interesting pre-Christian elements in celebrating the feasts linked to Christianized megalithic temples, we observe in connection with the worship of the

Ascension at Palatski peak. According to the informants the preparations for the celebration of Ascension begin the evening before the holiday when they kill the sacrificial animals. For this purpose, each family tries to provide for itself a male kid goat, because the only way to go to Palatski peak is if you are carrying a roasted goat meat for the sacrifice of St. Spas. People sacrifice a goat instead of a lamb because in the minds of the local population St. Spas is mischievous and a kid goat³ is considered a devil like animal⁴. Sacrificial animal can be killed early in the morning, but it is preferred to be done at night, in order to have enough time to cook the meat and the pastry. The holiday itself begins with a liturgy, given in the village church after which the sexton rings the bell to signal that it is time to go to the top of the peak. People go together, dressed in their holiday clothes. On the top, the families sit and eat together, probably subconsciously feeling that St. Spas is present at the table. The celebration continues with circle dances and fun, and when it is time to leave back to the village, St. Spas says goodbye by sending them rain.⁵

Interesting pre-Christian elements in honoring the feast of St. Christopher /the Holy Spirit/, at Lyaskovski peak, is observed in the requirement to sacrifice a black ram during sunrise on 22 May. The sacrifice is offered at the highest part of the top, over the opening of a vertical cave in which the blood falls (Markov 2007:21-24). The symbolism of the ritual and ancient aspects are discussed by Vasil Markov. I will focus only on the ethnographic information that the first sacrifice, performed at Lyaskovski peak was given by St. Christopher, who wanted to thank God for transforming him into a dog. In practice, by this act, St. Christopher founded the celebration of the Holy Spirit at Lyaski peak and started the tradition according to which every year a bachelor, like St. Christopher, should kill the sacrificial animal. It is interesting to note that the reason to sacrifice a black ram, is because the saint was *vakal*, i.e. black.⁶

Megalithic Monuments, Christian Feasts and Rain Rituals

Given that the weather phenomena associated with rain, are positioned at certain high places, and especially the peaks within the rural area, it is no coincidence that it is these places which are honored in connection with the provision of rainy summer. As noted repeatedly above the text, this type of faith and rituals are common in connection with Christianized megalithic temples and could be defined as one of their characteristic traits.

In practice, providing rain is among the main reasons for performing *kurbans* at the Pilentseto peak, on 8 May, and at Lyaski peak on 22 May. According to informants from the villages Lyaski and Dobrotinovo, on the feast of St. Krastor, after the sacrificial ritual is over and when all the villagers go back to their homes, it always rains. We have found information about similar rituals

³ Informant Sofla Pashova 81 years old, Drakata Village (2013)

⁴ Informant Kostadin Sulev 73 years old, Palat Village (2013)

⁵ Informant Zorka Trencheva 89 years old, Mikrevo Village (2013)

⁶ Informant Radka Buchkova 80 years old, Lyaski Village (2003)

regarding the celebration of the Day of St. Spas at Palatski and Krastilski peak. It is common to rain on that day, as it often starts raining as soon as the people leave the holy place. It is important to note that in the folk calendar, the holidays around Pentecost are traditionally related to the idea of praying for rain. On the Day of St. Spas, in a number of villages in southwestern Bulgaria up to the 50s of the 20th century, prayers for rain were performed, and in some places those prayers are accompanied by sacrifices. On Sunday, after the Day of St. Spas, people honor the Holy Trinity, again praying for rain (Джапева 1980:448).

Statement of rain is extremely interesting. It finds parallels in folk ideas for St. George's Day rain and is related to the beliefs about fertility in the upcoming summer season. According to the folk beliefs, the rain on the Day of St. Spas is as important as the rain on St. George's Day - every drop is worth a gold coin, therefore it is the greatest wealth of the farmer (Маринов 1994:619,637, Марков 2010:21-23). With the same semantics we can describe the rain on the holidays of the Holy Spirit and St. Christopher, and possibly the Day of St. Kostadin, related to the peak of the area studied by us.

In the ethnographic information about Christianized megalithic temples, it is repeatedly implied about one of the main functions of the pre-Christian mythological character, inherited from the Christian saint - patron of the place - to provide moisture. The legendary knowledge of the settlement remembers the pre-Christian character in the image of a dragon that lived at Lyaskovski peak, the highest parts of *Ali botush* and the mountain territory over the village of Pirin. Also the image of King Marko, whose traces are seen in the villages Palat and Krastiltsi. Another element of the functions of the Christian saint, who we could relate to the pre-Christian image, is the statement that the Holy Spirit thunders and rattles at Lyaskovski peak, i.e. we observe aspects of the image, typical for the supreme deity of the storm.

It is important to note also that the relationship of megalithic temple to the rituals for praying of rain, are also performed after the feast, in periods of drought. During prolonged drought senior women, who are widows, climb up to Lyaskovski peak. They bring a ritual bread */lyutoritsi/* with them, which is placed near the hole of the Holy Spirit, and then they cry and pray to the saint to send them rain. Then they take a short nap / probably pretend to be sleeping / and returned to the village. It is believed that after performing this ritual it starts to rain. Such a practice is observed at Pilentseto peak. In cases of drought the fir tree, placed on the day of the feast, is discarded. The man, who discarded the tree, should put another one on the same day because, according to local belief, it is necessarily to have a tree on the top. Providing rain through ritual practices, performed at a high settlement peak, is also seen in the statement from the village of Paril, where they have the so-called Butterfly ritual. In times of drought, girls from the village dress up an orphan child with elderberry and perform a ritual tour of the village and the adjacent lands, including the climbing of St. Kostadin peak.

Maiden and Female Initiation

In the worship of Christianized megalithic temples, we observe interesting rituals that are related to the idea of bachelor's, maiden's and female's initiation. The bachelor initiation is interpreted by Vasil Markov in connection to the rituals including actions such as: lifting a stone at Lyaskovski peak and performing leaps at Pilentseto peak. Due to the limitation of the exhibition here I will focus only on the maiden and female initiation.

From the ethnographic information about the celebration of the Holy Spirit at Lyaskovski peak, it becomes clear that in the past, the girls from the village of Staro Lyaski started together their walk in their festive costumes. While climbing the slope, they must stop at three places and with their faces toward the village, they perform a ritual song called *Elena Dukena*. The song is sung interruptedly – a couple of verses at each stop.

Rise/3 Denitsa⁷
Twice earlier before dawn of day /2
Triple earlier before Sun rising /2
Thus we can go on the peak /2
Where we will find Yalena /2
Yalena, Dukena /2
Yalena cries /2
Dukena keeps Lent!⁸

The final, third stop, where the song is finished, is the highest point from where the village is visible. When the village is no longer visible, the girls enter the forest and head to the top. From this point there is no requirement for the implementation of strict songs - the girls sing whatever they want.

We could connect the content of the performed by the girls ritual song to the dragon legends, which often incorporate the pre-Christian idea of the sacred marriage. In this case the folk mythology defines Lyaskovski peak as the nest of the dragon and the maiden Toplitsa, grabbed by it from Musomishta village, located under the top. Given that certain places from the top are interspersed with episodes from the life of the dragon and the maiden, then duplicated in Christianity by the located beside them churches of St. George, St. Spirit and St. Krastor and the "living" religious and healing practices, we can not ignore the analysis in maiden procession in connection with the dragon legends.

In the procession and in particular in the requirement for the girls to stop at three places and sing with their faces toward the village, there is an element of forgiveness. The song, performed by them, tells that they are going to see Elena, who is on top. Elena cries and is in a condition that resembles the condition of a bride in the first few days after the wedding. The girls dressed in their festive

⁷ In Bulgarian folklore planet Venus is called Denitsa (Вакарелски 1977:413; Георгиева 1993:30)

⁸ Informant Radka Buchkova 80 years old, Lyaski Village (2003)

costumes, are acting as in the after-marital rituals, in which the bride is visited by her mates, who are eager to understand the details of the early marriage life, i.e. to become involved with the elements of marriage.

Forms of female initiation are observed at Palatski peak. Here the main participants are the women who got married during the last wedding season. The tradition demanded that after the improvised liturgy, in which the priest blessed the sacrificial offerings, the young brides and their mothers-in-law climbed to the highest point of the top. The brides stood on the east, looking to the valley and the peaks of Pirin, and the mothers-in-law – on the side. All of them were singing is the ritual song.

The brides had to bow in a specific direction, the informants describe it "toward the sun"⁹, i.e. to the east, toward the sunrise. To the east, before them they see the Pirin mountain peaks and the valley of the Struma River. Thus young brides pay their tribute to St. Spas. The aim is to be seen and heard by the saint. Given the specifics of the celebration of the Day of St. Spas, in the ethnic territory of Bulgaria, it could be stated that this case is related to stimulating fertility associated with one of the basic requirements toward women – to carry a baby under her robe, to provide her man and the kind with children (Ганева 2003:36; Гаврилова 1999:330-335).

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to emphasize that present analysis doesn't exhaust the comprehensive and interesting subject of continuous use of ancient unorthodox religious centers in the territory of South-Western Bulgaria.

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⁹ Informant Zorka Trencheva 89 years old, Mikrevo Village (2013)